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No gawkers invited for breast-baring

Ramona Santorelli and Mary Lou Schloss hope tonight's 11 o'clock news doesn't look like a rerun from a year ago.

They don't want us seeing:

• The usual group of women taking off their shirts to challenge a state law that allows men, but not women, to expose their breasts in public.

• The usual gang of male geeks and gawkers hooting and hollering like drunks slobbering over a stripper at a stag party.

• And then the usual platoon of police moving in to trundle the women off in police cruisers after arresting them for indecent exposure.

That's what happened one year ago today in a wildly popular and sometimes silly piece of summer entertainment: *Shirts vs. Skins.*

Seven women — the Topfree 7 — were arrested at Cobbs Hill Park for doffing their shirts in public.

Santorelli

The protest made international news and the *Donahue* show. And it was the talk of the town, until Rochester found something more exciting — a three-week-long boil-water advisory caused in part by caterpillar doo-doo in the city's water supply.

But today it's time for the sequel — *Shirts vs. Skins: The Story Continues.* Some of the women who participated in last year's protest will gather in a Rochester park to do it again.

THIS YEAR, however, they're taking a different approach.

They're not disclosing the time and place ahead of time, to keep the geek-and-gawk factor to a minimum.

They aren't asking to be arrested so they can challenge the constitutionality of the law, as they did last year.

And they haven't even invited professional agitator Nikki Craft of Wisconsin, who came to Rochester for the protest, took off her shirt and was arrested — her 42nd arrest for protesting pornography or supporting nudity.

They're just hoping for a low-key, consciousness-raising picnic, *sans* shirts.

"We'd be very happy if there was no big deal at all," said Schloss, an organizer of both protests.

"I would be delighted to have the media say, 'We're not interested in covering this,' instead of having them call and say, 'You *are* going to let us know when you're doing it, aren't you?' "

Fat chance. The media — and society in general — aren't ready for that.

AND THAT's what the topless protesters want to change.

"People ask me, 'When are you going to take off your shirt?' " said Santorelli, another organizer. "I tell them, 'Hey, I take off my shirt every day.' "

So Santorelli says that more than the law has to change.

"If the law were changed tomorrow, I don't think I'd feel any more comfortable about taking off my shirt and walking down Monroe Avenue or Park Avenue," she said. "I don't know if I would be able to handle the stares and the hassles and the comments."

To the Topfree 7, last year's protest wasn't a battle over covering up. It gave them a soap box to discuss more important — and more legitimate — issues.

They can't understand why women are allowed to dance topless in bars or have their bodies exploited to sell cars and cigarettes, but not to feel the cool breeze against their skin on a hot day.

AND THEY SAY that many women feel so uncomfortable about their breasts that they go to extreme lengths to have the "perfect" Barbie-doll figure.

Some have breast-implantation or breast-reduction surgery. Some get the eating disorder anorexia. Others won't do regular breast-cancer checks because they're afraid that they'll wind up less than a woman if they lose a breast.

Their points were usually ignored in the tongue-clucking and jokes generated by the protest. Most of that was because the public was turned off by the way the women went about getting attention.

But the points were revived in the trial of the Topfree 7 last fall before City Court Judge Herman J. Walz.

Walz ruled that the women had been exercising their right of free speech and dismissed indecent-exposure charges against them. But he upheld the constitutionality of the law they protested.

Since the law is still on the books, they'll protest again today.

But once again, the manufactured spectacle will overwhelm the real issues.

Michael Zeigler is the local news columnist for the Democrat and Chronicle.